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Meant to Aid Iran Factions, Reagan Says

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President Reagan told congressional leaders yesterday that the secret operation to ship military equipment and spare parts to Iran began as part of a larger effort to support some dissident factions vying for power in Tehran, administration officials said.

In a White House meeting, the president and top administration officials detailed the origins and subsequent operation of the controversial covert program run by presidential aides that led to the release of some U.S. hostages in Lebanon held by pro-Iranian terrorists.

The operation has provoked angry exchanges within the White House in recent days between chief of staff Donald T. Regan and national security adviser John M. Poindexter over how to explain the president's previously secret actions to Congress and the public, officials said.

On Nov. 6, Regan and Poindexter got into a "shouting match" in front of the president in the Oval Office, with Regan demanding that some details be made public and Poindexter insisting that all be kept secret, officials said. The president initially sided with Poindexter, they added.

Attempting to calm the rising congressional demands for information about the operation, Reagan met for two hours yesterday with Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), House Majority Leader James C. Wright Jr. (D-Tex.) and Rep. Dick Cheney (R-Wyo.), fourth-ranking member of the House GOP leadership.

Officials said Poindexter told the congressional leaders that arms shipments to Iran, which contradicted a longstanding U.S. policy to isolate Iran and remain neutral in the Iran-Iraq war, were justified in part to help dissident factions that could assume power after the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Officials said the congressional leaders were told that the negotiations for release of the hostages came about as a "byproduct" of the earlier efforts. However, the administration officials reported that the shipment of weapons to Iran became linked to efforts to free the U.S. hostages.

[Poindexter told reporters last night that the United States will pursue its controversial dealings with Iran, United Press International reported. "We are going to continue our policies. We have thought all along that our policy was correct," he said.]

Administration officials acknowledged yesterday they are attempting to shift attention from the arms-for-hostages aspect of the Iran negotiations to the purported larger goal of establishing links to potential Iranian leaders. This was the thrust of the briefing to congressional leaders yesterday.

However, Byrd, who has criticized the administration as undermining U.S. credibility with the Iran operation, said after meeting Reagan yesterday that "my mind has not been changed." A congressional source who received the Poindexter briefing earlier said the administration is "rewriting history" about the Iran operation.

While the Iran operation began as part of a long-running U.S. concern about the future of that strategic nation, officials have said the flow of American military equipment and spare parts to Iran was initiated at the suggestion of Israeli intermediaries in mid-1985 as a way to win freedom for the U.S. hostages. The first shipments were sent just before the release of the Rev. Benjamin Weir in September 1985. Further shipments were made in this year, before two more hostages, the Rev. Lawrence M. Jenco and David P. Jacobsen, were released by the Islamic Jihad.

In each instance, White House officials had expected more hostages to be released, and on several occasions they were disappointed when no one was freed, sources have said.

Administration officials said the congressional leaders have been given several justifications for the president's deciding to contravene secretly his publicly stated policy of not paying ransom for hostages. The United States has labeled Iran an "outlaw" nation that supports terrorism and, led by Secretary of State George P. Shultz, has sought to halt worldwide flows of arms to Iran.

Yesterday, officials said Poindexter and others made a distinction between sending weapons to the captors of the American hostages, the Islamic Jihad group that owes its allegience to Khomeini, and aiding dissident factions within his government.

"We're not dealing with the captors," said one official familiar with yesterday's meeting. "We have singled out individuals we think can bring about change. They are not the ones who took the hostages"—a reference to the students who held American diplomats in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979-80.

Reagan was joined yesterday by Vice President Bush, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, Attorney General Edwin Meese III, CIA Director William J. Casey, Shultz, Regan and Poindexter.

Officials said the briefing yesterday was a belated attempt to provide information to congressional leaders after more than a week of criticism that the White House attempted to bypass them.

Other officials had said last week that the Iran operation was conducted by the National Security Council and not the Central Intelligence Agency in order to avoid disclosure to congressional intelligence committees required for CIA operations.

Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, announced yesterday that his panel will hold its first hearing on the Iran operation Nov. 21. Poindexter promised last week to brief the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence soon. That panel's vice chair-

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man, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, (D-Vt.), yesterday demanded full disclosure of the operation and accused the administration of "scrambling to find a reason for what they did."

Administration officials said the Iran operation has created a large credibility problem for the White House, in part because Reagan decided, after it was publicly disclosed, not to give the nation any explanation for the decision to contravene his antiterrorism policy.

Chief of staff Regan and national security adviser Poindexter sharply differed on whether the president should give some details of the Iranian operation to Congress, officials said. The president at first endorsed Poindexter's approach, but was then persuaded to hold yesterday's briefing. Former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane, who started the program and, after leaving the White House, made a secret trip to Tehran in late May, this week reportedly urged the administration to make public the details of the operation.

The credibility problem was exacerbated by signals from Shultz and Weinberger that they had strongly opposed the arms shipments to Iran, officials said. "We have nobody we can send out to explain this," said one official.

Another problem is that the administration is in the midst of considering sanctions against Syria for its role in the attempted bombing of an El Al airliner on a flight from London this year. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who broke relations with Syria as a result, is scheduled to visit Reagan at Camp David on Saturday.

The administration also is concerned that it faces a severe credibility problem with other allies and a host of moderate Arab nations, which were pressed repeatedly to isolate Iran while the United States was secretly shipping arms to Tehran through Israel, sources said.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said yesterday that the administration is "hopeful" that the hostages remaining in the hands of the Islamic Jihad group will be released soon.

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